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MEMORANDUM *indicating some of the CAUSES to which the DISCORDANCY of the COMMERCIAL STATISTICS of various COUNTRIES is chiefly to be attributed.* By JOHN ALEX. MESSENGER, *Department of Imports, &c., Custom House, London.*

[From the Report of the Fourth International Statistical Congress, London, 1860.]

ALMOST every State of the civilized world has now, for a longer or a shorter period, put in practice some method, accepted by itself as effectual, for the maintenance of a comprehensive record of its *External Commerce*. Few will be disposed to deny that such a record, if framed on a judicious plan, and if faithfully compiled from trustworthy documents, must throw a powerful and steady light on many questions which closely affect the interests of the community, and which might otherwise baffle the most acute investigation. But the conditions we have just noted as necessary to its usefulness, must be kept in view and realized in their spirit; for assuredly no statistical registry of Imports and Exports can effectually subserve those important purposes which it is designed, and which it is abstractedly competent to fulfil, unless it combine precision of plan with the fundamental quality of authenticity in the materials of which it is composed, and with a full measure of care and skill exercised in its construction. From the union of these attributes, results the general character of accuracy, the vital and essential principal to which every statistical registry tacitly lays claim. When we speak of *accuracy*, we are using a term which we think is not likely to be misunderstood. We mean not of course an absolute exemption from error, for in matter of this kind mathematical exactness is unattainable, but accuracy in the main—a certain truthfulness pervading the entire system of the record, and imparting to every conspicuous fact which it lays before us, enough of solidity to support any practical conclusion that we may logically deduce from it. To affirm that statistics, however elaborate and however symmetrical in form, can possess no real weight and authority unless accuracy in this sense of the word can be predicated of them, is indeed only to enunciate a self-evident proposition.

It deeply concerns us, then, to know whether such a measure of accuracy can justly be ascribed to the Commercial Statistics, either of our own country or of other countries in whose social condition and progress we feel an interest; and we are naturally led to inquire by what simple test, if by any, we may determine whether this essential quality belongs to them or not. An easy test, some one,

perhaps, may reply, will be afforded by a comparison of the statistical registries of various countries, where they come in contact with each other and occupy the same ground. If we direct our view to the Trade between two particular countries, and require evidence of its amount from the records of each, we may expect to find that, in the main, the one statement shall prove the *counterpart* of the other; that the *exports* on this side shall be reflected by the *imports* on that, and *vice versâ* the *imports* by the *exports*. An exact agreement we do not look for, and were we to encounter it on the surface, must believe it accidental, and infer the existence of error beneath it; but what we reasonably seek is a substantial correspondence between the two statements—an accord and harmony between them, indicating a basis of reality common to both. Now, does such a correspondence present itself to our view when, for example, we bring the accounts of France and England into comparison with each other, or when we institute the like comparison between either of these and the accounts of Belgium? We regret to say it does not. Where we had hoped for agreement, we discover at first sight little else than contradiction. Each of the statements, missing the confirmation it needed for itself, seems to interpose a caveat against the testimony of that with which it is compared. To what extent this is the case will be seen by reference to the Appendix annexed hereto.

The paper referred to exhibits, in separate tables, the reciprocal imports and exports of *England* and *France*,—of *England* and *Belgium*,—and of *France* and *Belgium*,—according to their estimated value, as represented in each instance by the accounts of both the countries immediately concerned. It is not necessary here to pass under review all the discrepancies which the comparison elicits. They are brought more distinctly before the mind, by a mere inspection of the figures, than we should succeed in bringing them, were we to array them in words; for the maxim of the critic,

“Segnius irritant animos demissa per aurem
Quam quæ sunt oculis subjecta fidelibus,”

may be not inaptly transferred from the domain of poetry to that of arithmetic. Leaving the tables to speak for themselves then, let us consider what impression will probably remain on the mind of any one who has carefully examined them, and who has no extraneous evidence to guide him in estimating the degree of authority to be assigned to any of the statements which they embody. Will he not conclude that he must refuse his assent to all these conflicting statements alike, and submit, as he best can, to remain in ignorance of the facts which each of them professes to set before his eyes? Such a conclusion may seem but reasonable, but, though we have

shown how naturally it may be arrived at, we are, happily, not obliged to admit its substantial justice. On the contrary, we trust we shall be able to show that the disagreement between these statements, embarrassing as its existence doubtless is, and greatly to be regretted, is not inconsistent with the essential veracity of each, being for the greater part produced by a difference in the form and arrangements of the records from which they are abstracted—an apparent, not a real contradiction.

When this is perceived, the practical object which the present Memorandum has in view will become manifest. Having first exposed the evil that the need of a remedy might be felt, we would indicate the quarter in which the remedy is to be sought.

We will direct our attention to the *discrepancy* between the *French* accounts and our own.

This, at first sight, is startling, both in the case of the *exports from France* to England, and in that of the *exports from England* to France; the difference on the former being nearly 10,000,000*l.*, and on the latter between 5,000,000*l.* and 6,000,000*l.* sterling. Now a part, and a considerable part, of the disagreement in both sections of the table, arises from the circumstance that, whereas our accounts show the imports and exports of the *United Kingdom* alone, apart from its outlying possessions, the *French* accounts include under the head of “*Angleterre*,” not merely the trade of France with the United Kingdom, but also that which she carries on with the Channel Islands, with Gibraltar, with Malta, and with the Ionian Islands; in short, with all the *European* dependencies of the British Crown.

With some of these France has a very considerable traffic. Into the *Channel Islands*, which enjoy an almost total *exemption* from import duties, she pours abundant supplies of wine, brandy, and manufactured goods of various sorts for the native and resident population. She furnishes wine also, and those chiefly of the better quality, to our garrisons in the Mediterranean; and, on the other hand, she imports, nominally through Malta, as we shall presently have occasion to observe, very large quantities of raw silk, brought by the way of Egypt from India and China. The amount of all these imports and exports we have no means of stating even approximately; but if it could be ascertained and separated from the totals which are presented under the head “*Angleterre*,” the difference which we have to discuss would be sensibly diminished.

Another cause of disagreement that operates very powerfully in the comparison between the French accounts and ours, is the arrangement under which France records among the exports to England, all the goods that are sent hither for *transshipment*,—merchandise to the value of millions, which merely touches our shores to

be immediately carried away to another destination, chiefly to the United States and to the countries of South America. Of these transshipments, the *English* account of imports from France takes no cognizance. We have a very rough and vague registry, either of their nature or their value; but according to the information rendered to us, they amounted in the year 1858 to more than 3,000,000*l*. The rule which the French officials follow in assigning this large trade to England, is in harmony with the English practice in the like case, for to whatever port goods are shipped in the first instance from our own shores, we account them exports to the country to which that port belongs without attempting to trace their ulterior destination. It is a rule dictated by convenience, but it operates detrimentally in respect to the object at which we aim.

The application of the converse rule, viz., which determines that *goods imported* indirectly shall be treated as importations from which they were immediately received, is another cause of disagreement between the French accounts and the English. France imports very large quantities of raw silk the produce of India and China; a portion of this is received *viâ England*, but another, perhaps an equally large portion, arrives by the way of Alexandria. The former portion alone is included in the English accounts under the head of exports to France, but it seems pretty certain that both portions are comprehended in the French accounts under the head of imports from England, apparently because the vessels which bring the silk to Marseilles touch on their way at the intermediate port of La Valette; and imports from Malta, as we have seen, are in the French point of view imports from England.

We abstain from any attempt to exhibit in figures the extent to which each of these causes of difference has affected the comparative returns of the two countries. Our materials are not sufficient for that purpose, but we may state our impression that, if the operation of these several circumstances could be precisely measured, the amount of difference which would remain to be explained would be comparatively small.

That remaining amount, whatever it might prove to be, would be ascribable partly to incorrect entries at the custom houses on the one side of the channel or the other, partly to errors in the valuation—errors which cannot be wholly avoided, notwithstanding all the care that is employed, and on the whole, we may affirm successfully employed, both in France and in England, to prevent their occurrence.

The detection and correction of such errors would, however, be rendered much less difficult than it now is, if the designation and classification of the articles of merchandise reciprocally imported and exported, were assimilated in the accounts of the two countries.

There is reason to believe that the rates of valuation adopted in the *English* returns for the years prior to 1859 for silk goods imported from France, were in some cases too low; on the other hand, some English products seem to bear too high a value in the French accounts. But the accurate juxtaposition of the two statements is impeded by the diversity of classification that exists between them.

We have now reached the point at which we may close this Memorandum, since the facts we have brought forward are sufficient, we think, to justify the general conclusion, which it is our object to establish, viz., that the commercial statistics, both of England and of other countries, would assume a more interesting and more obviously trustworthy aspect, and in every way would become better fitted to the uses for which they were instituted, if their principle, their structure, and their method of classification were made the subjects of a common concert among the respective States.

Under this general proposition we include the following recommendations:—

1. That the trade with each country should be so exhibited as to be separable from the trade with its dependencies and possessions, whether near or remote.
2. That the question should be entertained whether it would not be possible to devise means of ascertaining and recording the *ulterior* destination of goods exported, and the origin of goods indirectly imported.
3. That the attempt should be made to assimilate the *nomenclature* and classification of merchandise imported and exported, as exhibited in the official registers of different countries.

If these points could be achieved, we believe that the result would be a very important accession to our statistical knowledge in the department of international commerce.

APPENDIX.

TABLES showing the Trade between ENGLAND and FRANCE;—between FRANCE and BELGIUM;—and between ENGLAND and BELGIUM, as exhibited in each case by the Official Returns of both the Countries engaged in such Trade, for the Year 1858.

DESCRIPTION.	Computed Real Values.	
	<i>French Accounts.</i>	<i>English Accounts.</i>
(I.) FRANCE AND ENGLAND.		
Exports from France to England	£	£
Imports into the United Kingdom from France }	23,046,618	13,271,890
Imports into France from England		
Exports from the United Kingdom to France }	14,821,496	9,242,201
(II.) FRANCE AND BELGIUM.		
Exports from France to Belgium	£	£
Imports into Belgium from France	7,415,144	9,429,280
Imports into France from Belgium		
Exports from Belgium to France.....	7,713,597	9,321,280
(III.) ENGLAND AND BELGIUM.		
Exports from the United Kingdom to Belgium }	£	£
Imports into Belgium from England	4,328,939	4,718,640
Imports into the United Kingdom from Belgium }		
Exports from Belgium to England	3,060,654.	4,034,000